Really Fine On-line Garden Design

By Billy Goodnick

I'm not sure I should be sharing this with you. Besides writing, I earn some my income designing residential gardens. And here I am, about to hand you a great, free tool for doing it yourself. But I'm also a teacher and a generous kinda guy, so what the hell?

The local water agencies have shelled out some pretty serious coin to fund a goodie-filled website with lots of water conservation ideas. Follow their advice and you'll save money while helping preserve the planet's most essential natural resource – clean drinking water. You've read my rants ripping folks who let water run down the gutter, or squander it washing sidewalks. (If you want your concrete clean enough to eat off of, toss it in the dishwasher.)

Smart water use in the garden has two key components: Wise water management is important, but putting the right plant in the right place is where sustainable landscaping begins. Growing conditions can vary widely on a small residential lot: The same plant that thrives in cool morning sun on the east side of your place turns into oven-roasted 'tater skins when subjected to the summer scorch of afternoon sun. A mounded bed in one part of your yard might provide ideal drainage for natives, while clay deposits in the parkway usually mean the same plant's kiss of death.

With thousands of plants to choose from, how do you decide what to plant? I've got nothing against everyone's go-to garden encyclopedia, the *Sunset Western Garden Book,* but what if you could take an on-line tour of LOCAL gardens, click on plants that turn you on, then read everything you'd ever want to know about how to use each one flawlessly, and print out a shopping list?

Then step right up, ladies and gents, for the rip-roaringest, easy-peasy, life-changing garden design website in the whole world.
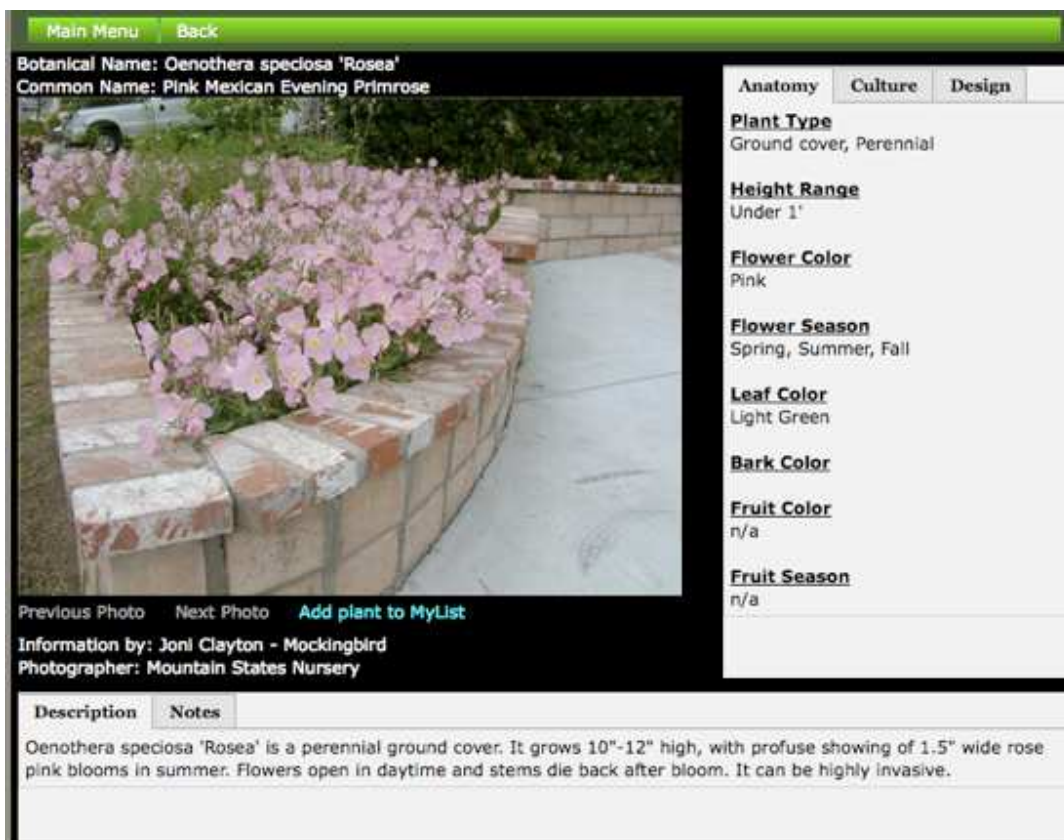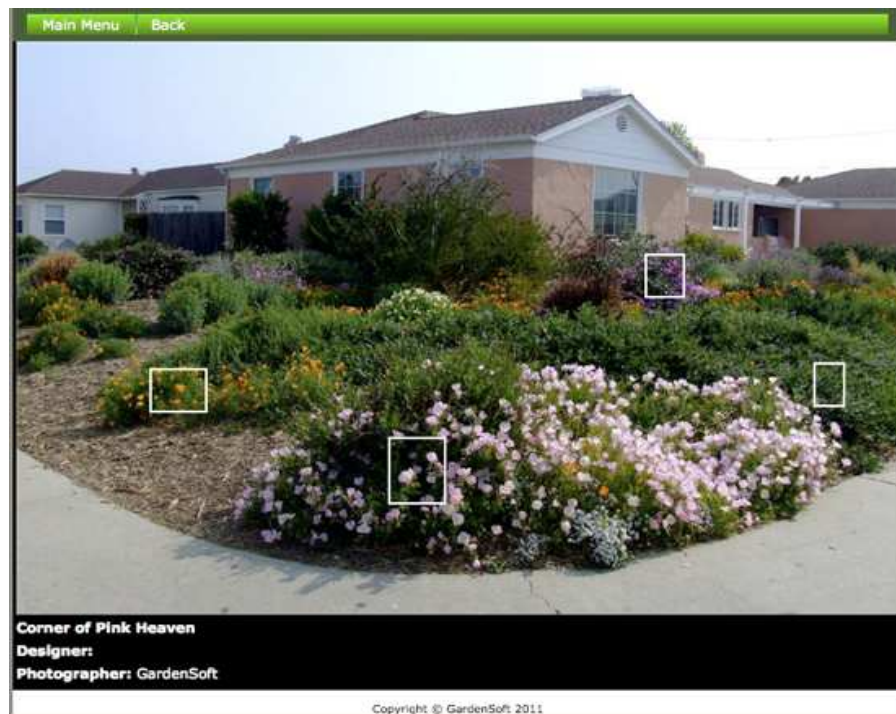
When you go to the **SBWater.org** home page, you'll find lots of useful information to help you save water in the garden and in the house. But for now, just click on the upper left corner of the page, where a brilliant bouquet of golden flannel bush flowers will send you reaching for your Raybans.

Next, click the garishly green "Garden Tours" tab to find 24 actual gardens, including contemporary designs, cute Spanish bungalows, sweet cottage gardens, and a bunch more.

Go back to the main menu and choose "Garden Gallery" for a collection of typical garden situations: front yards, hillsides, parking strips, lawn alternatives, California native gardens – 30 categories in all.

Once you find a garden or gallery that looks interesting, click through and discover a series of thumbnail pictures – at least a dozen – of different areas around each garden.

One more mouse click brings you to a close-up view. You'll notice little white boxes overlaying some of the plants, and that's where this garden power tool revs up.

Now you're looking at an info-packed database for this plant. Three tabs lead to essential information: "Anatomy" (size, flowering season, foliage color); "Culture" (solar needs, water preferences, soil tolerances); and the uber-useful "Design" (styles of gardens where this plant looks best, it's most attractive features, seasonal interest, and locations for using it).

Take THAT, Sunset!

Once you've identified a plant you'd like in your own garden, click "Add Plant To My List". When you get back to the home page, you'll see the corresponding tab that takes you to the personalized plant list you've just started for yourself.

Wait! There's more! After you've compiled your list, you have four printout options:

Hydrozone Reports creates a sub-list of plants grouped by similar watering requirements. That way you avoid planting an inefficient mash-up of thirsty ferns and heat-loving succulents in the same bed.

All Pictures Report is just that – your personal photo gallery that helps you visualize how nicely all the kids will play together in the yard.

Plant Detail Report combines all the database info for easy reference.

Plant List Report gives you a slimmed-down version of the database.

Even if you intend to use the services of a professional designer (preferably one who's name rhymes with Silly Sputnik, wears a stingy-brim hat, and writes entertaining, useful blog posts you love to read), the free "Water Wise Gardening In Santa Barbara County" website will help you find cool new plants and narrow your choices.

Don't worry if you live outside the immediate Santa Barbara area – with only a few exceptions, these plants will grow in any Mediterranean gardening climate, including San Luis Obispo and Ventura counties. If you're not sure, look at the cultural information and crosscheck it with your own gardening location (they're all based on Sunset's 24-zone system).

Pretty freakin' cool, eh? And it's 100% free.

So check out the SBWater.org website. When you're done using the plant finder, poke around and you'll find links to Garden Wise Guys, the TV show I co-host with Owen Dell.